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ABSTRACT

An examination of writing readiness (the state of being ready to write with a reasonable chance of success) across grade levels has revealed some developmental stages involved in writing and has indicated the role of intention in writing. The analysis has begun at grade two, since younger children's writing is greatly affected by their preoccupation with control of the writing instrument. It has been observed that the writing of second grade children reflects a lack of understanding of form and structure in writing, that by third grade most of the writing samples conform to mature form and structure, and that by fourth grade (and to a lesser extent third grade) paragraphs begin to occur. The finding that second grade children express more complete thoughts in autobiographical writing than in expository writing supports the beliefs of many researchers and theorists about the positive effect on language tasks of a clear, immediate intention. Second grade writing samples written to ask questions and to share secrets further indicate that writing based on a clear purpose is more complete syntactically than other types of writing. Other findings suggest that children usually became great storytellers by fifth grade, but that writing seems to become strained and difficult again by grade seven or eight. The findings support the encouragement of writing that is close to students' interests and raise questions about the decline in imaginativeness and freshness of the writing of secondary students. (GT)

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Writing Readiness At the Elementary Level

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Writing readiness has been called a state of being ready to write with a reasonable chance of success (Stallard, 1977). Such readiness consists of the writer having command of a satisfactory level of syntactic competence, a set of operational concepts, effective composing strategies, and positive attitudes toward writing and toward self as a developing writer. This model of writing readiness has been derived from observations of student writers as they write (Stallard, 1974) and an examination of their written compositions at secondary and college levels. In its present form, writing readiness has only begun to be explored, and, while some of the major elements have been defined, others will continue to be derived from research. Further investigation is needed at the elementary level for a fuller understanding of the various stages of writing readiness. Consequently, the authors have collected and examined compositions from a variety of students in the elementary grades.

While the writing of children at kindergarten or grade one is difficult to assess due to children's lack of transcriptive skill, even a cursory examination reveals two elements missing from previous analyses. In the domain of psychomotor behavior, children in kindergarten and grade one are primarily concerned with holding and controlling the movemenent of the pen or

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pencil. For those who may not remember their own initiation into learning to write, it is another skill that must be learned. One of the chief concerns of children in this age group is the task of graphically forming letters and words on their papers. Solving this task makes the analysis of other elements very difficult since most of the child's attention is directed to controlling the writing instrument. Such concern over the simple act of manipulating the writing instrument interferes with other skills a child might otherwise be able to exhibit.

It has been suggested by some researchers that oral composing or using typewriters will free children from the physical constraints imposed by not being able to do handwriting with ease. Either approach probably introduces variables into the process that prevent the compositions produced from being meaningfully compared with those produced by hand. Another factor for early elementary grades relates to the available speaking vocabulary and syntax which differ enough from available written vocabulary and syntax so that the oral and written compositions cannot be compared meaningfully. Oral and written vocabularies, research would suggest, are non-equivalent. Using a typewriter also creates the need for additional skills which makes the two processes of composing differ enough to render meaningful comparison unlikely.

For these reasons, it seems appropriate to begin the analysis of elementary writing readiness at grade two. At this level most children are free enough from the constraints of writing by hand to produce products that can begin to be compared and analyzed in light of a model of writing readiness. Even at grade two, however many will have some trouble managing the physical act of

writing as evidenced by cramped, slanting, or scattered words on their paper. Another factor, then, in developing writing readiness at the K-2 level is the development of ease in handwriting. At more advanced grade levels, when controlling the pen or pencil doesn't intrude, the child can pay more attention attention to expressing complete thoughts, and developing concepts and strategics for composing.

Beyond the psychomotor task of handwriting, the writing of second grade students indicates a lack of knowledge of simple transcriptive devices such as capitalization, punctuation, and spelling. Also, there is an apparent lack of adequate syntactic variety in their written language. We have all, at one time or another, noticed that children at this age level are able to say what they mean with ease but have great difficulty putting the same ideas in written form. Such difficulty may well be the best illustration that children need to develop their written language much as they must develop their spoken language. It may also suggest that the cognitive processes of writing differ from those of speaking.

Another language factor at this level of development is vocabulary. While students may have extensive listening, speaking, or reading vocabularies, the vocabulary available for writing is so limited, that, like handwriting, it becomes a major impediment to invention and creation of an extended piece of written communication. As the examples of second grade writing illustrate, the children frequently limit their written productions to one or two sentences.

Their writing readiness is further limited by a lack of understanding of much more than the simplest matters of form and structure of written discourse.

The problem of not understanding form and structure may be compounded if not created by the way written material is presented in the texts used at this level. Notice how the examples take the form of a list. It may be that the models of written discource they have had up to this point have had a similar form. Indeed, many of the workbooks and texts they are required to use reveal this type of format. Listing sentences and ideas may also suggest that it is necessary for children to develop the concept that one sentence follows immediately upon the completion of another. The concept of paragraph will come later of course. One other possible cause of this listing behavior of second grade children may be that this format compensates for the lack of such transcription skills and tools as use of end punctuation, capital letters, internal punctuation, or even paragraph indentation. By starting each new thought on a new line, the child is providing the needed clue that a new thought is being undertaken. By third grade, again as the examples illustrate, more transcriptive devices begin to come into use and there is more conformity to mature form and structure. By third grade <u>most</u> of the writing samples examined conformed to mature form and stucture but very few of those in second grade did.

In the third grade and definitely by the fourth grade, we begin to see paragraphs occur in the writing. Several developmental factors contribute to these changes. The child is maturing as a reader, has read more extensively, and has, consequently, more personal experience with the written language. Features of the written language are being internalized as a result of this experience. At the same time, the physical problems of handwriting have

overcome and writing vocabulary and syntax have expanded. In essence, the child's writing readiness by this time has matured to a point similar to the point in initial language acquisition where complete thoughts can be expressed orally. The fact that their compositions reflect more development may also suggest a greater confidence in their writing abilities.

SAMPLES OF SECOND GRADE WRITING

Assignment: Tell why you like or dislike Spring.

1. I like to see the sun
   I like spring because i like to play

2. I like spring because its beautiful
   I like it.

3. I can go see my cousin in richmond.
   And I can fo fly m,y kite.
   And I can go and paly tag.

4. I likw sring to wash.
   I will play in spring.
   I like to read a book.
   spring in me favorite day.

Assignment: Tell me the story of your life.

1. I was born in 1972 my birthday is April 25.
   My buthrs name is Sean and my dadys name is tom
   My mamas name is june.
   and my grand pas name is George _____.
   and my grand mas name is Elizabeth _____.
   and my sisdrs bname are bethand julie _____.
   I was born in Westvirginia in I is a hilldilly.

In the process of examining second grade writing samples, a difference in both the physical appearance and syntactic variety individual students exhibited on different kinds of writing tasks was noticed. In those examples based on

the assignment that asked the children to write the reasons why they liked Spring, the efforts were very strained. The writing task was expository, and, apparently, difficult for them to do. The second assignment asked that they write the story of their life. In this second assignment there was an overall increase in the number of thoughts expressed, and more of the children exhibited an ability to write complete thoughts. The assignments were were given only a few days apart. In the first assignment, 35% of the pupils wrote at least one complete thought and 21% wrote more than one complete thought. In the second assignment, 49% wrote at least one complete thought, and 41% wrote more than one complete thought.

James Moffett made the point several years ago in a speech delivered at the University of Virginia that children are better able to write about events and things that are close to them in time and experience. Writing that deals with subjects or events that are removed in time, place, or relevance to the child are, according to Moffett, more difficult for tne child to deal with. This relates to a point James Britton made in a lecture delivered at Old Dominion University in the Spring of 1979. He spoke of the role of "intention" in the act of using language. He gave the example of trying to feel with a stick for an object under a sofa. As one uses the stick, all attention is focused, not on the end of the stick in the hand, but on what Britton called the intention end of the stick. That, of course, is the end under the sofa that will retrieve the object. One cannot see that end of the stick but knows what the stick is to accomplish, and the mind is able to telegraph this intention to the hidden end of the stick and direct it to its purpose. The point that Britton was making

about intention was that when the intention is clear, immediate, and known, the task is facilitated.

In his essay entitled "Language and the Nature of Learning: An Individual Perspective," published in the 1977 Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education under the title of The Teaching of English, Britton further develops this point. He says, "...children will learn to use language primarily in the course of using it to satisfy their own purposes. Children's syntactical resources have been investigated not only by observing their spontaneous utterances, but also by studying their ability to imitate sentences offered to them. (Susan) Erwin worked with five children at ages between 22 and 34 months and compared their spontaneous utterances with their imitations. Her general conclusions supports what others have suggested, that children at this age cannot imitate structures they are incapable of producing spontaneously. 'We cannot look to overt imitation as a source for the rapid progress children make in grammatical skill in these early years.' Slobin and Welsh take the arguement a stage further. Studying a two-and-one-half year old, they noticed that her spontaneous utterances were often surprisingly long and complicated. For example, 'If you finish your eggs all up, Daddy, you can have your coffee.' Then using utterances such as these as models for her to imitate, they found that she was able to repeat them correctly unless they were offered within about ten minutes of her original spontaneous production. They conclude that an important aspect of language production must be an intention to say so-and-so. If that linguistic form is presented while the intention is still operative, it can be fairly successfully imitated. Once the intention is gone, however, the utterance must be processed in linguistic terms alone--without its

crginal intentional and contextual support. In the absence of such support, the task can strain the child's abilities, and reveal a more limited competence than may actually be present in spontaneous speech."

Noticing the difference between the language used on assignments like "Why I Like Spring" and assignments closer to the child's experience and need to talk about himself or herself such as "The Story of My Life," the question arises as to whether the factor of intention contributed to the difference between these two samples of writing.

It was necessary, then, to find a way to collect writing samples where the role of intention clearly had a chance to operate. In other words, a use, as Britton expressed it,"...to satisfy their own purposes." If such writing differed markedly from other samples, it would seem to suggest that intention might play a role in writing just as it seems to do in spoken language. Consequently, a rule was made in a second grade class that all questions the children wanted to ask had to be written on slips of paper. Oral questions were not accepted. A "Question Box," a pencil, and slips of paper were provided. The first observation was that the children loved to write questions. They wrote so many questions that the procedure came close to disrupting the class the first day it was tried. Over a period of two weeks, more than two hundred questions were collected. Eighty-two percent of them were syntactically complete. That is, they had both a subject and a predicate. Seventy percent were accompanied by correct end punctuation. As it turned out, they were not all questions. Some children took the opportunity to tell little things they wanted to share. It would seem that written language that emanates from and satisfies a child's own felt need to communicate enables him to exhibit a degree of readiness he does

not exhibit when that inner need or intention is not present.

The next step was to try to find another similar writing task that would require more sustained and developed writing than the questions did. The third week, a large box was decorated with colorful paper, called the "Secret Box," and, the children were told that when they wanted they could share one of their secrets with the teacher. Anyone who works with young children must have noticed that they delight in sharing secrets. Again, this sharing of secrets was an act of writing that satisfied the writer's own purposes and the element of intention would seem to be operational. Again, the written language was more complete syntactically and reflected a readiness that initially they did not seem to possess.

SECOND GRADE WRITING SAMPLES FROM THE "SECRET BOX"

1. Hi
I did a picture in Art.
I will tell you what it is about.
It is a dragon in a stormy
The sky is yellow, blue, green, red, pink, brown.
purple. His is a skinny dragon. With all feet.
He has lumps on his back. And he has
fome on his horns. And no tail.
It is face picture.

2. My Secret

I have a baby sister. She
is a moth old. Here name is
Theresa and she is cute
but she has a big mouth.

3. My father is getting rid of my dog.
My dog is 10 years old. My dog
dosint bite inless
somewon piks him up.

4. I am eight years old
but no doddy no about it.
My birthday is February 22
1980.

The differences in the written language the children used on these occasions raises some questions. First, do exercises such as sentence combining practice lack the important element of satisfying a writer's own communicative purpose or intention? Could this explain why growth in sentence complexity due to sentence combining practice does not readily seem to transfer from worksheet exercises to original writing? Like sentence combining, many of the tasks children perform in school are what Britton calls "dummy runs." Not only are they artificial or contrived communication situations, the content of such exercises is too far removed from the writer for him or her to internalize how the grammatical sturcture solves a personal communication problem. Expository tasks such as explaining "Why I Like Spring" require abstract thinking that is probably beyond the cognitive capacity of most children of early elementary age. Even at the secondary level, when cognitive maturity has reached a point where abstract thinking is physically possible, the lack of readiness in the other elements of writing may well combine with the absence of clear intentions to create a task too complex for many pupils. At this point, research is only beginning to question the role of intention in writing with elementary pupils.

Other observations about writing readiness based on the analysis of elementary student writing reveal a steady growth in grades 3, 4, and 5 of writing vocabulary and syntax. By mid-year of the third grade, more enthusiasm and delight in writing seem present, and by fifth grade children have usually become great story tellers. Freed from the psychomotor, vocabulary, and syntactic constraints they started school with, fifth grade children are more able to bring their imaginations and creativity into play.

WRITING SAMPLE FROM FIFTH GRADE

Assignment: Tell me the story of your life.

AUTORIOGRAPHY

I was raised on city sunshine, and I'm happy with dirty air. I was born July 1st, 1969 in De Paul Hospital. I'm in fifth grade and I'm 10 1/2 and I suffer with my brother and sister and they suffer with me.

I would like to be a doctor to help people like my Cousin.

In school my favorite subjects are: spelling, recess, lunch, and the end of school. In sports I like: ice skating, kickball, soccer, hockey, swimming, and wrestling.

As a matter of fact I've got great parents who have taken me to Disney World and Philadelphia and Miami Beach.

The teacher who is encouraging writing at every opportunity instead of assigning "dummy runs" is probably being most helpful to the development of writing readiness at the elementary level. Since talk is prologue to the other language arts of reading and writing, the effective teacher is probably creating situations where children, in order to satisfy their own exploratory needs, have to engage in extended oral discourse. If that can be a springboard to writing based on clear and felt intentions, then writing readiness is probably being encouraged at its maximum rate.

Looking at student writing at the junior and senior high school level, one has to wonder what happens to the steady progress of pupils through grade five and six. Writing development that literally explodes at grade three and which still reflects an element of delight and confidence in grade five, seems to again become strained and difficult for the student at grade seven or eight. It is puzzling to look at samples of high school writing and find that pupils at that level all too often write with less imagination, less freshness in their language and in some cases with less development than many third grade children do.

The question arises as to whether this is a byproduct of the instruction they receive at that level or whether it is a product of physiological change and the concomitant loss of self confidence that usually accompanies puberty. At any rate, it seems timely to look at writing readiness across grade levels K-13 if for no other reason than to understand better what developmental stages are involved.

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